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Herman Wasserman

University of Sheffield, UK and Rhodes University, South Africa

Abstract

As emerging democracies in Africa, the political communication systems of South Africa and Namibia have undergone major shifts since the early 1990s. For both these countries, democracy brought greater and constitutionally protected freedom of the media. This freedom was however seen as linked to certain responsibilities for the media to fulfil as democratic institutions. From ongoing clashes between journalists, politicians and the state in both these countries, it has become clear that there is no clear consensus about what media freedom and responsibility means in the context of these new African democracies. Drawing on approximately 50 semi-structured interviews with journalists, politicians and political intermediaries in South Africa and Namibia, as part of a multi-country comparative study, this article explores how values like freedom of speech, media responsibility and the democratic role of the media are understood by these various role players in the political communication process.

Keywords

democratization, elite continuity, media freedom, Namibia, new democracies, political communication, responsibility, South Africa, transitology

Corresponding author:

Herman Wasserman, Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Rhodes University, PO Box 94, Grahamstown, 6140, South Africa.
Email: h.wasserman@ru.ac.za

Introduction: Media freedom and responsibility in new democracies

The new era of political pluralism, free market economics and media liberalization that followed the fall of Communism, also swept the African continent in the 1990s (Blankson, 2007: 19). South Africa formally became a democracy with the first election of a majority government in 1994, following a process of negotiation that started with lifting the bans on liberation movements and the release of political prisoners. Namibia gained its independence from apartheid South Africa in 1990, after an illegal occupation that had lasted since 1966, when the latter's mandate to administer then South West Africa was revoked by the UN. The democratization process in both these countries was therefore linked to the demise of apartheid after decades of a bitter struggle for liberation from white minority rule. The advent of democracy in South Africa, which made possible Namibian independence, was seen by many as part of the 'global trend to democratization' and the triumph of liberal democracy following the end of the Cold War (Von Lieres, 2005: 22).

The demise of apartheid, coinciding as it did with the end of the Cold War, invites comparisons with other 'emerging democracies' in Eastern Europe. The emerging discipline of 'transitology' has become a 'growth industry', although the role of the media as a democratic institution has been largely ignored in such studies (Voltmer, 2006: 1). Some parallels can be found between the South African situation and the media in post-Communist countries in Eastern Europe and Asia, where authoritarian control of the media for political means has given way to twin processes of democratization and marketization, which have circumscribed the nature and extent of media transformation in these environments (Sparks, 2009; Splichal, 1992). Despite the comparisons invited by transitology, the democratization process in new democracies around the world has been 'far from uniform' (Sparks, 2009). The question has also been asked to what extent the changes in these countries constituted thoroughgoing *transformation* of society or rather resulted in the repositioning of or partnerships between elites (Sparks 2008, 2009; Splichal, 1992).

The political changes in these transitional countries have had profound implications for the restructuring of the media and civil society (Murphy, 2007: 2), with the media becoming a site and an agent for change (see Teer-Tomaselli and Tomaselli, 2001: 123). Yet disagreements as to the media's role and its relationship to the developmental state often arose. The liberal-democratic orthodoxy of media freedom as a prerequisite for the truth to emerge from contestation in a 'marketplace of ideas' has been criticized for its potential to aggravate tensions and conflicts and privileging the voices of those who have access to mediated communication (Voltmer, 2006: 3). In countries such as South Africa and Namibia, emerging from long histories of violent conflict and marked by continued severe economic inequalities, such criticisms become even more pertinent. The coupling of political democratization with increased marketization of media within a globalized context also created tensions between the drive to commercialize media and the need to include previously marginalized groups into the new democratic public sphere (Sparks, 2009). Given these competing imperatives, the importance and meaning of media freedom is all but self-evident.

Usually coupled with the notion of media freedom is that of responsibility, often framed in terms of the ‘watchdog function’ of the media (Voltmer, 2006: 4). However, in new democracies adversarial or antagonistic media are sometimes seen to undermine the fragile trust put in a new government (Voltmer, 2006: 4). Especially in the developing world it has been argued that the media should support government in its national and developmental goals – being a guide dog rather than a watchdog – even if this means curtailment of press freedom (Gurevitch and Blumler, 2004: 338; McQuail, 2005: 178). These demands are often resisted by the media, who safeguard their new independence at all costs. This tension between freedom and responsibility may in new democracies be exacerbated by the deep social divisions inherited from the authoritarian era, which problematize the notion of a ‘public interest’ (Voltmer, 2006: 5; Wasserman and De Beer, 2005, 2006). Although the American-inspired social responsibility model has been seen to enjoy global acceptance (Christians and Nordenstreng, 2004), significant differences in meaning or negotiations of the relative importance of central normative concepts have been noted in the Global South (Wasserman, 2006; Wasserman and Rao, 2008). The notion of media responsibility is sometimes also used as a pretext for the protection of powerful interests, as in the case of the ‘dignity laws’ in several African countries (including Namibia) that prohibit the media to insult political leaders (Blankson, 2007: 24). The coupling of freedom with responsibility is also not always unproblematic, as the unprecedented freedoms being made possible by the collapse of the authoritarian regime often lead to excesses, as have been noted in countries in Asia and Eastern Europe (Yin, 2008: 20).

This article wants to establish how the notions of freedom and responsibility are viewed by role players in the political communication process in two African transitional countries, namely South Africa and Namibia. By focusing on some of the ‘values, norms, beliefs, sentiments and understandings of how power and authority operate within a particular system’ (Amin, cited in Gurevitch and Blumler, 2004: 335), the article engages the cultural dimension of political communication (Pfetsch, 2004), while acknowledging the influence of structural conditions on the norms and expectations that govern the interaction between the sets of actors.

Methodology

Viewing the transition to democracy in South Africa and Namibia as part of a global trend linked to the end of the Cold War era suggests certain *prima facie* commonalities which could best be studied from a comparative perspective. Yet the ways in which democratization, economic marketization and media pluralization have taken place in these transitional contexts display important specificities which require such a comparative approach to be flexible. While comparisons between the structural aspects of institutional histories, economic systems and ideologies are important (and might in themselves show significant deviations), attention to the cultural dimensions of these transitions may bring to light more clearly the way in which citizens in different countries have responded differently to these structural changes (Murphy, 2007: 8). This article focuses on this cultural dimension of political communication in transition, paying detailed attention to the specificities of individual countries but doing so against the

background of comparative media systems theory. The article stems from a larger study¹ of political communication in new democracies conducted in eight countries in Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, Poland), Latin America (Brazil, Chile), South East Asia (South Korea, Taiwan) and Africa (Namibia, South Africa). The interaction, relationships, expectations, values and norms of three sets of actors – politicians, political journalists and intermediaries like spokespersons, lobbyists and extra-parliamentary activists – were compared on the basis of semi-structured interviews using an interview schedule developed collaboratively. An interview schedule was developed among the team of researchers and applied in each country studied, allowing for some minor flexibility according to the specific conditions of the respective countries. Questions were organized into five major categories: orientation towards the democratic system; perception of own role and of counterpart; news production; relationship between media and government/politicians; and personal characteristics. After data collection, the responses were coded and analysed using a codebook that again was developed collaboratively between the researchers representing various regions, in order to obtain an analytical tool that could be applicable in a cross-country comparison. This article is based on 49 (26 in South Africa, 23 in Namibia) in-depth interviews with journalists, politicians and intermediaries in Namibia and South Africa conducted in June 2008. The article focuses specifically on questions in the (more comprehensive) interview schedule that concern interviewees' understanding of press freedom and responsibility, as these form part of respondents' general orientation towards the democratic system. The central research questions of this article may be formulated as follows: How are notions of freedom and responsibility understood by various actors in the political communication process in South Africa and Namibia? What are the commonalities and differences between these understandings?

This study is not intended to provide conclusive or generalizable evidence of the political communication process in these countries. Instead, they offer an overview of some of the main themes or tropes that emerged in the interviews, and as such are aimed to provide the contours of a debate about press freedom and responsibility in African democracies from a comparative perspective.

Contextualizing the responses

The advent of democracy had a significant impact on the media landscape in South Africa and Namibia, both in terms of structural aspects such as policy, regulation and ownership, as well as on cultural dimensions like normative discourses and professional practices. After the apartheid era, during which journalists in both countries were subjected to restrictive South African laws, resulting in bans, police raids, harassment and detention of journalists (Kudlak, 2007: 150), media freedom became entrenched in the democratic constitutions of both countries. While these freedoms allowed the respective political communication systems to open up, new pressures were exerted by respective governments who clashed with independent media or interfered with the governance and editorial processes at the public broadcasters.

The media landscape in both countries underwent shifts in terms of ownership to transform the industry in terms of race, politics and economics (Berger, 2001: 151).

Ownership of important South African newspaper titles was transferred to black empowerment consortia (and to foreign investors like Independent and Pearson Plc); an agency was set up to develop community media and black journalists were appointed to senior editorial positions. An independent licensing body, the Independent Broadcasting Authority (later taken up by the Independent Communications Authority, ICASA) awarded new broadcasting licences to community radio stations. Yet this greater pluralization and independence of the South African media were coupled with growing commercialization and tabloidization. The alternative, grassroots media of the apartheid era dwindled due to withdrawal of funding and the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) has been beset by problems, seeing its public service functions increasingly eroded by commercial priorities and government intervention (for more detailed discussions of the above transformations, see Banda, 2009; Berger, 2001; FXI, 2008; Sparks, 2009; Tomaselli, 2002, 2004).

In comparison, Namibia had a higher degree of state ownership and government control over both the print and electronic media, including a government-controlled newspaper,² *New Era*, which was established after independence from South African occupation in 1990 (Kupe, 2007: 139). In South Africa the 'enduring plans' by the ruling party to establish their own newspaper have not yet materialized (Hadland, 2009). Ownership changes in Namibian media have not been as wide-ranging as in South Africa, partly because of a lack of black capital but also as a result of the continued dominance of South African capital in the region (Mason, 2001: 84). Like in South Africa, government attempts to control editorial content at the public broadcaster, the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), have become a subject of political contention, as has increasing commercialization of the media generally (Beukes, 2007: 64; Mason, 2001: 88).

Aside from these structural changes, the cultural aspects of political communication in both South Africa and Namibia shifted as the media moved towards greater self-regulation and professionalization, although the processes played out differently. In both countries the media's claims to greater independence brought to the fore conflictual understandings of the media's role in a transitional, developmental context.

In South Africa, the highly legalized media environment of apartheid made way for a self-regulatory system governed by ethical codes, while a new non-racial professional body (the South African National Editors' Forum, SANEF) became an increasingly vocal defender of media freedom (see Barratt [2006] for a history of the organization). A similar professional body, the Namibian Editors' Forum (NEF), was recently established in Namibia, but the self-regulatory system in that country is less developed. The absence of a press ombudsman or formal recognition of a code of ethics in Namibia led to what some see as a 'wanton disregard' for ethics and lack of public debate about media-related issues (Beukes, 2007: 64). It is however worth noting that the Windhoek Declaration calling for the development of a free press in Southern Africa, was signed in Namibia in 1991 (Kupe, 2007: 140).

In both these countries, the respective governments have criticized the media for failing to regulate themselves, and in turn proposed the establishment of a statutory body to ensure that media act 'responsibly' and uphold human rights (Louw, 2007). This proposed Media Tribunal (South Africa) or Media Council (Namibia) met with fierce

resistance from journalists (SANEF, 2008; *The Namibian*, 2008). These were but the latest in ongoing disagreements about the media's role in the new democracy.

Formal guarantees of press freedom notwithstanding, the relationship between the media and government in South Africa has been marked by interventions and conflicts since early in the new democratic era (for examples see Berger, 2009; Hadland, 2007; Jacobs, 1999; Louw, 2007). Such conflict is seen as intensifying (Louw, 2007: 82) to the extent that some commentators (e.g. Fourie, 2002) have drawn parallels between the African National Congress's (ANC) intolerance for media criticism to that of the apartheid regime. Similarly in Namibia, media have regularly come under attack from politicians and the government for abusing their freedom to 'destabilise government' (Media Institute of Southern Africa, 2005). Laws making it an offence to insult political leaders and which can be used to force reporters to divulge information on their sources have had a chilling effect on the country's media (Blankson, 2007: 24). The ruling party's (South West Africa People's Organization – SWAPO) Council of Elders has called for the independent newspaper *The Namibian* to stop publishing readers' SMSs, which they claim are insulting to the president, Hifikepunye Pohamba, and the former president, Sam Nujoma, and will 'propagate hatred and promote public discontent' (*The Namibian*, 2009).

The Namibian government has also been accused of withholding government advertisements in the independent daily *The Namibian* as a restrictive measure (Hofmann, 2007: 151), a strategy that South African political authorities (national and local) have at times also threatened to follow (Louw, 2007: 76). Like in South Africa, government attempts to control editorial content on the public broadcaster, the NBC, have become a subject of political contention, with the government retaining direct ministerial control over the NBC board (Beukes, 2007: 64; Mason, 2001: 88).

Another threat to media independence and pluralism identified in the Namibian context is rampant commercialization of the media as a result of inadequate regulation, which, similar to South Africa, has impacted adversely on public broadcasting (Mason, 2001: 90).

From these clashes it has become clear that normative values such as freedom of expression, the public interest and social responsibility are all but self-evident in the new democracy (Shepperson and Tomaselli, 2002; Wasserman, 2006). The aim of the current study is to identify how these central notions are understood by the various actors in the political communication system, in order to establish what norms and expectations inform their behaviour and might contribute to conflicts. The interview responses follow in the next section.

Findings

Changes in freedom of expression

South Africa. There was wide agreement among journalists, politicians and intermediaries that democratization has brought unprecedented freedom of expression, linked to a human rights culture. These freedoms, manifested in constitutional guarantees and protected by a range of watchdog organizations like the Freedom of Expression Institute, the

Press Ombudsman and SANEF, but also made visible through the transformation of the industry, were seen as an important foundation for political debate within the country. The legal environment was seen as supportive of rigorous political debate. These changes also created greater transnational news flow so that South African media became less parochial, taking a less 'provincial view on world affairs' as one journalist put it.

Nevertheless, respondents often pointed out that pressures on freedom of speech and of the press now took a more subtle form, ranging from 'bullying' or 'heavy-handedness' on the part of politicians, especially towards black journalists, who were expected to 'toe the line' or contribute to 'nation building', to economic pressures preventing the media from fulfilling their investigative watchdog function as well as they should.

The public broadcaster, the SABC, was time and again singled out as a media institution where press freedom was being threatened, either by state intervention or by increased commercialization.

An important perspective offered on media freedom in post-apartheid South Africa was that it created the space for media to emerge as a political player in their own right. In this regard the South African media seemed to follow the example of other emerging democracies, where the media have also been shaping the behaviour and expectations of political participants (Voltmer, 2006: 6), and other African countries since 1990 where the media have emerged as an alternative power centre to government as a result of greater liberalization. This is different from the immediate postcolonial era, when media were expected to play a supportive role to the developmental state (Blankson, 2007: 17, 18, 20, 22). Such developmental expectations, coupled with an insistence on African cultural values (see Wasserman, 2005), often serve as rhetorical justification for the post-apartheid South African state's interventions into the media sphere. These interventions include threats to withdraw state advertising from newspapers (see Hadland, 2007; a point also remarked upon by a journalist respondent). Yet several respondents in this study saw the post-apartheid South African media as performing or having to perform the function of an opposition party, countering the power bloc of the ruling party in the absence of a major opposition party to the ruling ANC.³ This role was described as follows by a journalist:

In the absence of any serious political opposition I think the media is one of the organizations... that basically shines a spotlight on things and it's become almost a quicker way than the official methods for trying to get justice done. You know if you haven't got the house you're supposed to get or this or that you phone a radio station or you write to the *Sowetan* or even the *Daily Sun* and you get yourself on the front page and something happens as a result.

This oppositional role of the media is discussed in more detail later, as part of what was seen as media's responsibility in democratic politics.

When freedom of expression is defined more broadly than the formal constitutional changes brought about by democratization, the outlook was less positive. Measured in terms of people's ability to voice their concerns or as a qualitative dimension of media practice, freedom of expression was seen, mostly by critical intermediaries on the left, as

not making a real difference in the lives of the poor majority of South Africans. Because the exercise of freedom of expression is dependent on access to information and to channels of communication that have been increasingly commodified and commercialized in the new dispensation, this freedom was sometimes seen as out of the reach of the poor majority. Media freedom, more specifically, on this view is seen as hampered by commercial interests, leading to a narrow conception of the public and its interests and to a form of self-censorship.

These critiques of freedom of expression are discussed in more detail later in the article.

Namibia. Similar to South Africa, there was consensus among respondents that Namibia enjoyed much greater freedom of expression than was the case before independence. Journalists remarked on the proliferation of private media and the presence of civil society organizations like the Media Institute of Southern Africa that safeguard constitutional guarantees. The growth of the community radio sector was also cited as a positive development for media pluralism and independence. Yet, like in South Africa, journalists expressed concern about infringements or subtle pressures on freedom, such as the intimidation of editors and journalists or appeals to African cultural values according to which those in positions of power should be respected. Both intermediaries and journalists complained about lack of access to official information, with state journalists getting preference over independent journalists. The retention of old South African laws (the same section 205 of the Criminal Procedures Act, which is also still controversial in South Africa, under which journalists can be forced to testify in court and reveal their sources) was also mentioned as a deterrent to investigative journalism. The general situation was summed up as follows by a journalist:

Well you know freedom of expression and freedom of the media is of course not something that one can take for granted in this country. Although it is guaranteed by our constitution it's a constant fight to protect those rights . . . because . . . government tends to feel that the media should play the role of praising them, and you know that they shouldn't criticize government or be negative about anything government does. I would say that since independence the media in Namibia have managed to play the role that they should within society, of being a voice for the community that they serve and the people of the country in general. Although this often brings the media into conflict with government . . . Namibia is fortunate that unlike other in countries the government . . . has grudgingly come to accept that the media is there, it has a role to play and it's not going to go away.

Main threats to freedom of expression and press freedom today

Political threats: South Africa. Several direct threats to press freedom were identified, e.g. the ruling ANC's proposal that a Media Tribunal be established to replace the self-regulation by the press ombudsman, or the proposal of new laws (e.g. the Film and Publications Amendment Bill,⁴ which could make pre-publication censorship possible). More subtle political threats included perceived government influence in the editorial content of the public broadcaster or behind-the-scenes politicking on the board of the SABC. The interviews were held before the split in the ANC that saw the ousting of

President Thabo Mbeki, the withdrawal of corruption charges against his successor Jacob Zuma and the formation of a new rival party, the Congress of the People (COPE). At the time of the field research, the tremors in the political landscape were however already unmistakably severe and respondents remarked on the impact of political infighting on the climate of political communication, as the public sphere became increasingly polarized. A clear victim of this political ferment was the SABC (see Berger, 2009), where internal tensions linked to the Zuma–Mbeki opposition impacted negatively on the SABC's ability to exercise its freedom of speech in the service of its public broadcasting role.

Political threats: Namibia. Concerns were also expressed about political threats emerging in the post-independence period in Namibia. Intermediaries remarked on the government's sensitivity to criticism, while journalists reported intimidation and were 'becoming more and more worried' that they had to be 'very, very much careful about what you say'. One recurring topic, already mentioned earlier, was the government's threat to establish a Media Council to regulate media content (similar to the Media Tribunal proposed in South Africa). The remedy suggested by journalists was to establish a more vigorous system of self-regulation, in line with normative values of independence and a watchdog function. But as an intermediary pointed out, the government's proposal was also partly the result of the inability of the media to set up their own self-regulatory mechanisms. Perhaps not surprisingly, a politician from the ruling party foresaw the role of such a council as 'guiding the media when it becomes too intrusive'. Opposition politicians were however more likely to point out that the desire for control comes from the ruling party and that they (the opposition) were more amenable to press freedom.

The familiar criticism in development journalism that media should work with the government rather than against it (see Musa and Domatob, 2007; Ogan, 1982) has also been used to silence media critics in Namibia, some respondents claimed. A politician from the ruling party articulated this expectation by making an appeal to culturally authentic values, saying the media often behaved 'irresponsibly' because their policies were set 'elsewhere' and were 'not indigenous'. This appeal was not unlike those made by critics of the media in South Africa calling for a more African orientation in media reporting (Fourie, 2004). Namibian journalists complained that media criticism was often constructed as undermining of the good order in society and counter-democratic. One journalist summed it up thus:

I will say in Namibia but also in the whole of the region especially is the tendency of people in power to sort of talk down to the media . . . to portray criticism as unpatriotic, as a conspiracy . . . I think if you succeed . . . to diminish the role or the credibility of media from an official platform that . . . is a big threat to media freedom because if people think that they cannot take media seriously, they won't. They won't and media will lose its purpose in general.

However, as one intermediary remarked, the demand for media to contribute to nation building can in fact be based on a 'one perspective fits all' attitude that could be counter-democratic.

Economic threats: South Africa. The end of apartheid brought about a shift towards increased commercialization of the South African media. The erstwhile vibrant alternative media (Switzer and Adhikari, 2000) disappeared as funding from overseas donors dwindled or was redirected elsewhere; foreign capital moved into the country (e.g. the Independent group taking over large sections of the English-language press); the Afrikaans media house Naspers became a global player; media houses ‘unbundled’ their holdings and sold parts off to Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) firms which led to the rise of new conglomerates. As part of this commercialization process, and in some cases (especially in the Afrikaans media) as a result of the purging of newsrooms of journalists associated with the previous regime, a widespread juniorization process of the media has taken place. Juniorization was already identified as a trend in 2002 in the National Journalism Skills Audit commissioned by the professional body SANEF (De Beer and Steyn, 2002).

The adverse impact of commercialization and attendant juniorization on investigative or informative political reporting was one of the most prominent themes that emerged from responses about new threats to press freedom. Commercialization was seen as leading to self-censorship and ‘dumbing down’ – what one journalist referred to as the ‘tabloidization of political news’,⁵ but also a somewhat inevitable force. For the more radical critics, especially those intermediaries on the left of government, commercialization of the media was tantamount to an alignment with the social and political elite, which belied the media’s claims to independence and fulfilling a ‘watchdog’ function and narrowed their perspectives. Journalists too remarked on how increasing commercial pressures made it difficult for them to pursue investigative or in-depth projects. Commercial pressure did not only entail cutbacks on investigative budgets, but also meant shaping coverage in a way that would attract an audience that advertisers were interested in. A journalist pointed out that sometimes these advertisers were the government itself, and after the *Sunday Times* published controversial allegations about the then minister of health’s alcoholism, a minister threatened to withdraw government advertising from the paper.

Journalists as well as intermediaries bemoaned the demise of alternative media and the lack of viable, grassroots community media and the increased conglomeration of media companies. These trends were seen to limit perspectives on social reality even if a wide range of media titles exist. Media were seen as ‘moving upwards instead of moving down’, a process which was seen to narrow the possibilities for people to ‘truly exercise their freedom of expression’.

The impact of commercialization was also felt on the level of professional journalistic identity, which in turn had implications for the way in which journalists will exercise their freedom of speech. A veteran journalist remarked on how commercial interests in the post-apartheid South African media impacted on journalists’ professional identities:

If you asked me about my role as a journalist 20 years ago, I could have given it to you in one or two sentences perhaps. Today it’s a very different thing... Commercial and other considerations come into play you know.... A young reporter recently asked an editor what would you describe as our mission?... Once upon a time three sentences could have

described what we were there for, but this chap said: It's to get a decent return on capital for our proprietor.

Economic threats: Namibia. Although commercialization of media was also seen as a threat to freedom and pluralism in the Namibian media, this threat seemed less pronounced than in the South African case, especially when compared to political threats. The use of tax money to fund the state-owned newspaper was mentioned as a sticking point, since state media were seen as an enemy of private media. For the latter to indirectly support the former through taxes was described as 'giving your enemy bullets'.

Lack of training was mentioned as a potential threat to efficient political communication, although this was not as prominent a theme as juniorization in South Africa. This is how one journalist described it:

Many of us including myself, we did not have the privilege of really getting proper training from the word go. Many of our journalists... you find yourself maybe just working as a journalist as on the job training and that's how you picked up your skill or you went to school up to a certain level so it's good and those who have done it they will tell you that for example, a story must have five Ws and an H.

Lack of investigative journalism: South Africa. Although there have been examples of excellent and far-reaching investigative work being done by newspapers like the *Mail & Guardian* or the *Sunday Times*, the media in general stood accused of favouring entertainment and diversion in the form of 'infotainment'. This is not a unique complaint about contemporary global media (see Thussu, 2007), but was seen by respondents as particularly problematic in a new democracy where the media should contribute to the strengthening of democratic institutions and root out corruption. In the South African context the lack of investigative journalism in the post-apartheid era was seen as particularly ironic or unfortunate given the fact that media are now freer to embark on such reporting than they had ever been under apartheid. In other words, the hard-won freedom was seen to be squandered for short-term commercial benefit. Some commentators linked the lack of investigative journalism to the preference for glamorous ('sexy') news stories of interest to an elite, and conversely the marginalization of issues of relevance to the poor majority which require more effort on the part of reporters.

Again this situation was seen to be exacerbated by the juniorization of newsrooms brought on by increased commercial pressures. These problems were connected as follows by an intermediary at a social movement:

... the groups that I'm concerned with, one of the problems we have is the quality of journalism and reporting and that's got to do with juniorization of the newsroom and lack of investment in serious investigative journalism. And also to prioritize the issues of the poor, they are not sexy, and I think that is our problem with all the bourgeois media in my mind, I mean poverty is not sexy... so we are all into these bullshit things of the celebrities and the gossip and of course glamorizing this sort of mindlessness and of course also selling products. So the media in the main actually plays this role, which is not an accident, it's a political function, it suspends critical thought.... It is to avoid people from asking but why people are still shitting in the bucket system 15 years after democracy, why they're living

in houses that are falling apart, why they're unemployed, why they're hungry, why they're poor, why for they're getting bad education and I mean in some ways there is a lot of possibilities for, for lack of a better word, developmental sorts of media in this country to raise these issues in a more systematic way than I think it (doing).

Lack of investigative journalism: Namibia. In Namibia, examples were given of investigative reporting into corruption or human rights abuses that had a positive outcome. Some respondents did however remark on the shortage of investigative journalists in the country. This problem was seen as partly to do with the lack of training (similar to the juniorization process in South Africa), but also due to economic obstacles, since investigative units require significant financial investment. The lack of depth in coverage was seen to have an impact on the way that policy matters are explained to the public.

Media responsibility

In both countries, two positions came to the fore regarding media responsibility. It was either seen as linked to democratic freedoms, so that certain restraints were in order, or it was seen as an excuse for government to exercise control over media content.

Responsibility as a corollary of freedom: South Africa. Although there was wide acknowledgement that press freedom entailed certain responsibilities, there was also some resistance against the idea of media responsibility because it was seen to constitute a kind of self-censorship. Among those that saw responsibility as a corollary of press freedom, there were mixed opinions as to whether the media succeeds in acting responsibly. Some of the general terms associated with media responsibility were 'transparency', 'accountability', 'accuracy', people's 'dignity and reputation' or the avoidance of incitement to violence and harm: 'the fact that you cannot extend your freedom to harm that of another'. Rooting out corruption and speaking out for the voiceless were also seen as hallmarks of responsibility.

Some journalists were however more open to self-criticism and acknowledged the role for some restraint:

I think that [responsibility] is also to address those issues when we abuse that freedom. I don't think those [self-regulating] bodies are always strong enough, I don't know if the press ombudsman is well enough... placed within those kind of structures so that people know that they can access it.... Media freedom comes with a hell of a responsibility and I think we are always on our soapboxes screaming 'media freedom, media freedom' but I think there needs to be introspection. What does it come with? It comes with a lot of responsibility and I think we need to engage with those issues on a regular basis and say, are we getting it right? Are we doing it right? And... where we're getting it wrong, what can we learn from that? Make sure we don't do it again.

Understandably in the light of South Africa's history, stereotyping, especially regarding racism and xenophobia were singled out by a number of respondents as an area where restraint on press freedom (articulated in the constitution as an injunction against hate speech) was important. The avoidance of racial stereotypes is a common feature in media

ethical codes in the country, but the interviews also took place shortly after a wave of xenophobic violence swept the country, which could have contributed to the salience of this aspect in interviewee responses. In general, the media were perceived to adhere to the ethical guideline of not inciting hatred or violence. A politician expressed it as follows:

There isn't any clear sign to me that any part of the press has behaved in an irresponsible way in for instance threatening the continued political tranquillity, enhancing the neo-political volatility, chasing up spectres of racism and so on . . . From where I'm sitting I've never seen any sort of deliberate, vicious attempts by the press to step outside their responsibility towards maintaining the basic disciplines which are associated with not firing up the public in terms of some ideological sort of wild card which can destabilize the political order.

It would therefore seem as if there is an acceptance – if not consensus – among journalists that some restraint on press freedom is necessary or desirable. A negotiation of the strong liberal-democratic normative ideals of independence and freedom seems to be taking place, and the fact that this restraint is often described in terms of concepts such as ‘dignity’, ‘avoidance of harm’, ‘protection of (human) rights’ or the ‘social well-being’ of ‘a community’ seems to indicate that such negotiation is informed by South Africa’s history, where these normative values have often been violated in the political process. The framing of such restraints in terms of social or community rights also suggests a less individualistic approach to media responsibility and ethics, one which has been compared to the African notion of *ubuntu* (Christians, 2004; Wasserman and De Beer, 2004; criticized by Fourie, 2004). This historical influence on normative values was expressed as follows by a newspaper journalist:

We have a certain history. Our history is not the same as many other countries. So when we write we have to sort of keep that at the back of our minds. We don't have to continuously remind . . . people. But now and then, based on our history, depending on what the issue is, we have to remind in our reporting, also state the fact that we don't need to have that type of situation again, we need to also educate our readers that the people, especially the young people of today, that many of them are fully sympathetic to what happens there so we need to educate them in what they do . . . that [what] they have is because of our history . . . our struggle . . .

Juniorization (as discussed earlier) was frequently mentioned as having a deleterious effect on responsible reporting. Journalists were seen as inadequately skilled to obtain all sides of a story or to provide context to news events. Intermediaries on the political left interpreted the media’s alignment with social and political elites as compromising the ethical norms of fairness, balance and independence. For these critics, media claims to ‘objectivity’ and ‘balance’ were belied by stereotypical news frames representing elite prejudices. For instance, a social movement intermediary referred to the ‘criminal’ frame through which shack dwellers’ protests against lack of social delivery is often viewed. For them, such a frame also detracted from the media’s information and education

function, because the public was not sufficiently informed about the reasons and context for such protests.

For journalists, providing opposition to the government was their most important responsibility. When prompted about whether the press acted responsibly, journalists would often ask themselves if they have been taking a strong enough adversarial stance against the government. The ideal role, from journalists' point of view, seems to be that of detachment and balance. One journalist saw it as a good sign when politicians from both the ruling party and the opposition criticized them, because it proved they were 'on the right track': 'it's a kinda nice position to be where both sides criticize you when you say something wrong about them'.

Intermediaries, however, criticized journalists for abusing their freedom by being 'reckless':

You have seen examples of the media being quite reckless We've seen it I think in the recent xenophobia and xenophobi[c] violence. How do we talk about farmers, for example? Is the media part of that irresponsible rhetoric that people from other countries are rebels, criminals, thieves and so on. Are they fuelling that?

Such stereotyping could also be seen broadly in relation to processes of juniorization and commercialization, where journalists lack the experience or the time to invest in proper contextualization of issues. An intermediary complained about this:

I don't think you can't untie [responsibility] from the fact that the newsrooms are populated with many people who are very young. And what that causes is really a need to churn out stories often without thinking, often without double checking their sources I think because the media don't invest in getting good [journalists], you know, if you go overseas you have someone who could be 40, 50, covering health or education. Here we don't have it, we have an 18-year-old who has just graduated or just done some course to say go and cover education. What kind of contextualized picture can that journalist give? They can't I think the media has incredible power and I don't always know if we use it responsibly We need to make things better for people on the ground and I don't think we're looking at it like that. We're just looking at, what kind of story can I do to get it onto the front page and to freak people out.

Responsibility as a corollary of freedom: Namibia. In Namibia, politicians were generally quite positive about the media, describing them as fair and objective on the whole, with the exception of the public broadcaster which, as in the case of South Africa, was seen to be biased in favour of the government. The constitutionally guaranteed freedom of speech was seen as being defended by court, so that media responsibility was also framed in judicial terms – media could be taken to court for libel, defamation, etc. From the government's perspective, the media's responsibility in Namibia was articulated in developmental terms. An example of this role would be to communicate political messages on behalf of the government to remote areas, as described by a government politician:

If the media is not allowed to operate but within the confines of the constitution the population will not be able to know what government is doing and what politicians are doing.

Namibia is a vast country with you know a small population. People are in the outlying areas. The radio, the newspapers are very, very important instruments in getting out you[r]... the messages.

Namibian politicians in general seemed to expect some form of responsibility attached to the freedom of the media. In particular, politicians belonging to the ruling party or in government expressed this expectation clearly, as did this respondent in justifying the need for a statutory media council:

We feel the freedom... in our constitution is not carte blanche you know. There are limitations. Democracy is not just anything... and anywhere. There are limits within which one should operate and therefore we feel that it's a constitutional consideration for the media to have that institution [the Media Council]... where those who are seen to be infringing upon the rights of others can be called to order just like in government.

Namibian journalists also accepted the need for fairness and accuracy in reporting, yet concern was expressed that responsibility should not lead to self-censorship of criticism. Avoiding 'tribal or racial tension' was, similar to the South African responses, highlighted as a specific area of concern for responsible media.

Responsibility as a smokescreen for control: South Africa. Some respondents, mostly journalists but also intermediaries and opposition politicians, warned that the notion of 'responsibility' may become a smokescreen for government to get media to toe the line. When used in this way, the demand for 'responsibility' becomes a form of pressure to engage in self-censorship. For this reason, journalists sometimes were reluctant to put too fine a definition on 'responsibility', sometimes preferring to stay within the legal circumscription of press freedom, e.g. not to incite violence (see below). On such a view, the media could simply be seen as acting responsibly because, as one South African journalist put it, 'we are not taken to court all that often'. Another journalist described the notion of responsibility as a form of pressure, as follows:

People who say that [the media has a responsibility] can stuff off. Firstly you cannot control the media. If you have a free press in a democracy like this you can't. Whenever people say that they're always hiding something.... People who say that generally are talking politically and they're talking for a political agenda.

This view was shared, albeit from a different position on the political spectrum, by some social movement intermediaries, who saw claims of 'responsible journalism' as a way of sidelining political firebrands and 'troublemakers' who provide radical critiques of the political status quo. A concept like 'national security' could in their view be used to cover up sensitive information.

Responsibility as a smokescreen for control: Namibia. Similar to their South African counterparts, the notion of media responsibility was also seen by some Namibian journalists as a way of preventing critical information entering the public sphere. One journalist called

responsibility one of the ‘darker sentiments coming from the side of the government’. The values of transparency and accountability were seen as important, while privacy was considered a more intricate legal subject.

Like their counterparts in South Africa, Namibian intermediaries seemed to see investigative work as part of the media’s responsibility:

Where there is smoke there is fire and this is a journalist’s job. You investigate the smoke to find out where the fire is coming from . . . I think people that have a problem with journalists being irresponsible are the people who are actually doing the things that they don’t want to be revealed . . . the ones that have something to hide.

Politicians were, however, quick to point out that the media should be free to write about anything as long as coverage is factual and fair. Opposition politicians used the notion of responsibility to criticize the government and shared the view of journalists that there is not enough access to government information – ‘Government business is basically secret business’, one said.

The media as opposition: South Africa. An important perspective on media responsibility that emerged from the interviews was that the media’s responsibility was often equated with providing opposition to government, as a result of the absence of a strong opposition party to challenge the ruling ANC’s dominance (although that support is gradually dwindling, see Southall, 2009). A journalist was quite critical in describing this attitude:

I also think that sometimes the media also positions itself as an opposition to the state, especially in a situation where you have quite a strong ruling party and a weak and splintered opposition, the media assumes an advocacy role which in some cases is healthy but in some cases that can actually distort progress.

The distortion that this journalist remarked upon was also mentioned by intermediaries and politicians, who saw the media’s eagerness to assume the role of a political opposition as resulting in selective publication or framing of information.⁶ Sceptical non-journalists (i.e. intermediaries and politicians) sometimes held the perception that a specific media institution’s or journalist’s own political preferences would influence their understanding of the media’s responsibility. In other words, the media’s claims to responsibility were perceived as masking what is in essence a political preference. Yet what exactly that political preference was that the media stood accused of, differed depending on intermediaries’ and politicians’ own position. For instance, politicians on the political right perceived Afrikaans-language media as being less balanced than the English-language media, as the former were ‘less inclined towards criticizing government as they should’ because of their political baggage as former supporters of the apartheid regime. Other political commentators, especially leftist extra-parliamentary activists, would in turn see the media’s use of ‘responsibility’ as a tool to support the hegemonic political order by not questioning the desirability of the political system itself. This political position in essence was seen as curtailing the media’s proclaimed watchdog function.

This eagerness to play an oppositional role was seen to also amount to irresponsible reporting when allegations are published without checking facts. An intermediary remarked on how journalists become ‘embedded’ with opposing factions within the ruling party, and find themselves ‘being used as pawns in very unseemly political fights’, sometimes even leading to being hired as spin doctors.

The media as opposition: Namibia. Like in South Africa, the (private) media in Namibia were seen by respondents to play the role of a political opposition. A journalist described this role as follows:

The citizens understand maybe it's because the opposition are not that strong so people tend to go with their problems to the newspapers. All the different newspapers. Some will go to all the papers. Some will go to the paper they feel comfortable with. Some will feel they want to address a paper who addresses a specific constituency amongst the readership so I think in that sense we are lead by society much more than anywhere else that I see.

While the state-owned *New Era* newspaper was seen to act as a mouthpiece for the ruling party and the government, several respondents observed that political parallelism in the media has been on a steady decline since independence. Now that the media do not have to position themselves pro or anti the liberation movement, they are now freer to serve as an ‘amplifier for the public conscience’ in a general sense.

Examples of irresponsible media actions

South Africa and Namibia. Tabloids, both in South Africa and Namibia, were sometimes singled out for irresponsible reporting, but from different perspectives. Some critics take a moralistic position, decrying tabloids for sensationalism and sleaze ('talking about what happens in your pants', as one politician put it). This type of criticism was, however, not always viewed as very serious in terms of its political implications. Others, like social movement intermediaries, criticized tabloids for only covering government failures like lack of social delivery on a superficial and individualized level without putting these stories in the context of bigger structural economic and political problems. One social movement intermediary called this the ‘mystification’ of sociopolitical problems in terms of individual reportage.

Not correcting or admitting mistakes was mentioned as a further type of irresponsible behaviour by newspapers that erodes their credibility.

Some politicians complained about journalists not reporting accurately, and had on occasion followed official channels (e.g. the press ombudsman) to complain about journalists. Because these complaint channels did not work satisfactorily for the politicians, they would respond by ‘cutting journalists off’ from information. This is how one politician described the process:

[The complaint mechanism] has not necessarily sorted the situation out but we kind of regard those guys, well they are still journalists, and they've got a certain political persuasion and that's fine, you know we'll just keep on putting in the complaints, but we kind of

write them off. So of course we're not going to go to them with scoops, and we're not going to go up to them with the kind of sense of, 'hey you are a reporter', because you know . . . We know which areas (of the media) are kind of more accommodating and which areas are more hostile.

In Namibia, the state-funded *New Era* newspaper and the NBC were singled out as being biased in favour of the government. A journalist remarked on the fact that the paper used its state subsidy not to report on events in remote, rural areas, which was the justification for state funding, but rather to compete with private newspapers in order to make a profit. The national broadcaster, the NBC, was also widely regarded by journalists, intermediaries and oppositional politicians as a government mouthpiece.

Politicians from the ruling party, SWAPO, felt that they were being made the focus of attack by the media, and politicians from across the spectrum complained that they were not always consulted for comment or deliberately given too little time to respond to allegations made against them in the press.

Similar concerns about tabloidization, lack of fact checking and sensationalism as in the South African press were also levelled against their Namibian counterparts.

Conclusion

On the whole, the discourse around freedom and responsibility showed many similarities between South African and Namibian actors in the political communication process, with the most significant differences occurring on the structural level (e.g. state ownership of media) or professional level (the self-regulatory system) rather than attitudes, norms and expectations, which showed much overlap. The following preliminary observations may be made on the basis of these exploratory interviews:

- Freedom and responsibility are still contested in these two transitional democracies, but there is also wide agreement on the formal aspects of media freedom brought about by democratization. Actors disagreed on the nuances or application of notions like freedom and responsibility, which can be used to disguise political agendas. New threats to freedom of speech are emerging, but they are more subtle than in the past.
- Democratization has brought a freer flow of information locally, but also opened up the local media for global/transnational influences. These global influences are both structural in nature (the influx of capital, which has led to increased commercialization and profit-seeking in a globalized market, with implications for the media's democratic functions) and cultural (the adoption or contestation of norms for media behaviour that have been imported from 'elsewhere').
- Some responses, especially from intermediaries that find themselves on the margins of both the party-political and media spheres, seem to support the notion of elite continuity in new democracies. These respondents point to the fact that democratization did not bring about a complete transformation of political communication, but that the actors in this system often still belong to the elite classes. On such a view, the media, their claims to independence notwithstanding, are seen to be aligned with government in privileging an elite discourse associated with neoliberal economic

- policies, centralized government with disregard for the poor, and a liberal-democratic political agenda in which challenges from the radical end of the political spectrum (e.g. social movements) are silenced, marginalized or criminalized.
- Commercialization and juniorization were mentioned prominently as limiting the media's capacity to act as watchdogs of government or do the investigative work needed to provide information to the citizenry at large. Tabloidization and sensationalism were lamented in both the South African and Namibian press.
 - Especially in the Namibian context, media access to information was seen as inadequate for the independent media, and government as too secretive about matters that should be placed in the public domain.
 - Abuse of notions of 'responsibility' by the state for political ends (covering up sensitive information or diverting attention away from scandals) was pointed out, but conversely media can also be seen to abuse the notion of 'freedom' to justify unfettered commercialization in the interest of a small elite.

From these responses it is safe to conclude that the media play an important role in shaping political debate in the new African democracies, but that the media themselves have also become the focus of debate and contestation. The vigour with which these debates have been conducted in these new democracies can be taken as a sign of the vibrancy of the mediated public sphere, even as its boundaries are continuously being renegotiated.

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Notes

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1. See note on Funding above.
2. Attempts by government-aligned South African investors to buy the *Sunday Times*, one of the government's fiercest critics, were thwarted (Louw, 2007: 82).
3. The ANC split in 2009 to form another opposition party, the Congress of the People (COPE), but the interviews took place before this split. COPE did not register significant support in the 2009 general elections to pose a challenge to the ANC.
4. This Bill, vigorously opposed by free speech lobby groups including SANEF, was sent back to parliament by President Kgalema Motlanthe in 2009 on grounds that it might be unconstitutional. An ironic confluence of diverse political orientations came to the fore when a right-wing politician reminded us that his party, the Freedom Front, supported the controversial Film and

- Publications Bill ‘for the sake of morality’ even though it opposes the government on almost every other level.
5. The example given by this journalist was the coverage of the ascendancy of Jacob Zuma: ‘The country was enthralled by his several marriages and the state of his finances, etc. It was almost produced in a serial-like, ambulance chasing kind of way. Newspapers would tell you straight that it sold newspapers.’
 6. An intermediary explained how this process works by giving an example of the media supporting a town mayor belonging to an opposition party. When this mayor confronts the ruling ANC in the province, they would agree with his views, but they would then still find ways of showing their dislike of him in other forums (like satirical columns) where such comment would be less likely to have a political impact.

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